



Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy  
Remarks as Prepared for Delivery  
St. John's Lutheran Church  
Winter Park, FL  
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Good morning. My name is Stephanie Murphy, and I am the Congresswoman for Florida's Seventh Congressional District.

It is an honor to stand before you today and under the roof of a Lutheran Church—which feels like a sanctuary to me. My family and I owe so much to the Church. If it were not for your generosity nearly 40 years ago, my life story would have been very different.

It feels particularly appropriate to be here on Father's Day, for two reasons.

First, Father's Day may recognize fathers here on earth, but Christians and other people of faith also address God as "Father." The Book of James states that "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights."

The gift of a better life was bestowed by the Father of the heavenly lights, through the Lutheran Church, to my family—refugees fleeing persecution and seeking to begin life anew.

The chance to start over is central to the Lutheran faith. The Bible describes the beginning of faith and baptism as a "regeneration"—a powerful means of grace by which God grants faith and forgives our sins.

The Lutheran embrace of regeneration is, I believe, why my family is here today. Because Lutherans sponsored my family's passage to the United States and helped us settle here in America, we were able to experience freedom, democracy, and opportunity.

Secondly, my late father was my personal hero, a proud and selfless man who always put his family first. There were no bounds to the sacrifices he was willing to make to ensure that his children had opportunities and a life better than his own. He initiated the journey that would eventually provide his beloved family with the chance for a better life in a free country.

As many of you may know, I was born in Vietnam in 1978 following a lengthy and destructive war. During the war, my mother worked on an air base in South Vietnam that was used by the Americans. My father worked for the South Vietnamese government.

When Saigon fell in 1975, many Vietnamese families like my own faced an uncertain future as the Communist regime began to consolidate power.

By mid-1978 hundreds of thousands of people associated with the former government of South Vietnam were being rounded up and sent to “re-education camps.” There they endured torture, starvation and disease while being forced to perform hard labor.

As you can imagine, my family was concerned about my future and the future of my eight-year-old brother. So they, alongside hundreds of thousands of other families, fled Communist-controlled Vietnam when I was just six months old—mostly by boat—to escape persecution, seek refuge, and find a better life for their families. Collectively, we became known as the Vietnamese boat people.

It was a treacherous journey and many didn’t make it. Most fled without proper documents, crammed into flimsy boats with limited supplies. Some were lost by storms, others robbed, raped, or killed by pirates. And some, like my family, simply ran out of fuel—dangerously adrift at sea with no means of reaching safety.

However, fortunately for us, an event occurred that forever changed my life and put me on a trajectory to where I am today. A U.S. Navy vessel discovered our small boat. Personifying the generosity of America, the sailors refueled and resupplied us, and pointed us toward Malaysia, where we eventually made it to a refugee camp.

Luckily, my family only stayed at that refugee camp for a few months before a Lutheran Church in Virginia sponsored our passage to the United States. Once here in America, they helped us find housing and helped my parents find jobs. The Church even provided us with warm clothing for the coming Virginia winter weather that we were not yet accustomed to.

Because of my parents’ relentless hard work at multiple jobs here in America, my brother and I were the first in our family to graduate from college—through a combination of scholarships, Pell Grants, and student loans. After earning a bachelor’s degree in economics from William & Mary, I began my career as a strategy consultant at Deloitte Consulting.

Then another pivotal moment occurred. On September 11, 2001, the country I owed everything to—the country that saved my family—was attacked.

In the wake of 9/11, I felt an overwhelming desire to try and repay the debt of gratitude I owed the United States and I heeded the call to public service. I left the private sector and eventually became a national security specialist at the U.S. Department of Defense.

It was an honor to serve alongside our men and women in uniform to help protect the country that had rescued my family so many years before.

After several years at the Pentagon, my husband had the opportunity to start a new small business in central Florida, so we relocated and made Florida our new home.

But that calling to public service never quite left me. So I sought to serve and give back to my community through charitable work with various nonprofit organizations and becoming an instructor at Rollins College.

However, I still felt there was more I could do. So I ran for Congress and—wouldn't you know it?—I won.

Today I stand before you as a refugee, a proud American citizen, a mom of two wonderful children, and the U.S. Congresswoman for central Florida—and also the first Vietnamese-American woman ever to serve in Congress.

I strongly believe America's greatness is born of a unique blend of power and principle. This is not an abstract concept to me. I did not discover it simply from eloquent words on a page or soaring lyrics in an anthem. Instead, my patriotism is the product of a life lesson, one instilled by U.S. service members bestowing grace upon desperate strangers—and by a community of compassionate Americans inspired by their faith who opened their doors and welcomed us into their lives.

Persecution—and attempts to escape it—is something all too familiar to the early Lutherans in Europe and here in America. This difficult history, combined with lessons distilled from Scripture, is why I believe Lutherans are so understanding of families like my own, families feeling persecution in search of freedom.

In preparation for my speech, I came across the Lutheran mission statement, which reflects my personal experience with the Lutheran Church. It states that Lutherans, bound by Holy Scripture, seek to do God's work in the world by pursuing justice, peace and human dignity for all people.

My family's story would not have happened without Lutherans who believe in the power of rebirth and regeneration—and who understand the importance of welcoming those who seek refuge, especially in a country founded on the idea that this nation would serve as an enduring refuge from tyranny all over the world.

America is known as the land of opportunity. It is our nation's pledge to every person that you should be able to succeed in America if you are willing to work hard and play by the rules. But it isn't easy—you have to work hard at it. In my experience, if you talk to nearly any refugee and immigrant who have become Americans, they are incredibly proud to be Americans and love their new country—just like my family.

In fact, one of my life's proudest moments was standing alongside my mom as a teenager when we took the oath of citizenship. My mom and I had studied together, and I had helped improve her English skills. We quizzed each other on the citizenship test and practiced our oaths together.

So there we stood, waving little American flags after taking the oath, beyond proud to be citizens of this great country. More than 25 years later, on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, my six-year-old son stood by my side and waved that same little American flag as I took a second

oath—the oath to become a U.S. Congresswoman. It was another proud—and slightly surreal—moment. While my father was not there, I know he witnessed that moment from Heaven and felt vindicated in that original decision to escape communist Vietnam; gratitude to those, like the Lutherans, who helped us along the way; and proud of my choices and contributions to the next generation.

But our family’s story would have never happened had America not held true to its founding principles—to be a beacon of hope, light and freedom to those escaping persecution around the world.

It also couldn’t have happened without the grace bestowed upon my family by the Lutheran Church who—in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—lived out their faith’s teachings and personified God’s love for all His children.

These acts are a cornerstone to the Luther faith—done not to earn salvation, but to give praise and thanks because you are saved. I am awe-inspired by that belief.

Martin Luther once said, “God doesn’t need our good works, but our neighbor does.”

Well, from one neighbor to another, thank you for the generosity that allowed my family to achieve the American Dream. Thank you for the love and compassion you demonstrate to the world. And thank you for all you do to make our community and nation a better, more inclusive place to call home.

Thank you, Happy Father's Day and God bless you all.